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ABSTRACT

In fall 1994, students in an interdisciplinary Gender Issues course undertook a project to examine gender and communication patterns through analyses of their own videotaped conversations and to relate their conclusions to findings in the literature. Students read two articles on the distribution of home responsibilities between professionally employed men and women and a comparison of the privileges of being white and of being male. Gender-balanced groups of four to six students were then videotaped while they discussed the articles. Students then read materials on gender differences in verbal and nonverbal communication patterns and analyzed the videotapes of their discussions to assess whether the communication patterns described in the literature applied to the groups. The groups then prepared a 2-5 minute version of their tape, an oral presentation of their findings, and a 1-page written summary. Overall, the communication patterns displayed by students closely matched those of the gender-typical patterns described in the literature, with male students tending to take control of conversations by initiating discussions, talking for longer periods, and using more verbal pauses and hand motions. While students were generally not happy with what they saw on the videotapes, they enjoyed the project and the opportunity to analyze their own and others' communication patterns. (BCY)

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Gender and Patterns of Communication

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Gender and Patterns of Communication

Abstract

Our students conducted a gender analysis on the communication patterns of their own videotaped conversations. This paper includes a description of the group project. Student responses and reactions to this project are also provided.

Gender and Patterns of Communication

Stacey Beth Zaremba and Sandra Elaine Fluck

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In the Fall of 1994 we co-taught an interdisciplinary class entitled Gender Issues. This course is the capstone course in a series of seven courses in Moravian College's Core curriculum. The topics that are covered in the Gender Issues course are: the biological and social components of gender, gender and education, gender and language and communication issues, and gender and power. In this paper we describe a group project that we conducted with our students which examined gender and communication patterns. We provide examples, from our students projects, of how gender influences both verbal and nonverbal patterns of communication. We also share student reactions to this project.

This project was designed to make the students aware of gender differences in communication (verbal and nonverbal) by having them examine their own behavior in a group setting. Once the students analyzed their own behavior they related their conclusions to the findings in the literature on gender and communication. A review of the psychological literature on women's and men's behaviors, abilities, and personalities reveals that gender similarities tend to be more common than gender differences (Tavris, 1991). Nevertheless, researchers have found that gender differences are

typically substantial in verbal and nonverbal communication patterns. For example, consistent gender differences have been documented for body posture (Hall, 1984), voice quality (LaFrance & Mayo, 1978), and conversational interruptions (Brooks, 1982). In addition, while the stereotypes that we hold for women and men and communication are very strong, research findings often contradict these stereotypes. In the case of talkativeness, for example, the stereotype is that women are more chatty and talk more than men. In actuality, however, many women talk less then men. Men tend to talk for longer periods of time and use more conversational fillers (i.e., "um", or "ah") as a method of holding the floor in a conversation (Hall, 1987).

The students were instructed to read two pre-selected articles (Biernat & Wortman, 1991 and McIntosh, 1993) and come to class prepared to discuss and react to the assigned articles. The Biernat and Wortman (1991) article discusses the distribution of home responsibilities between professionally employed women and their husbands, and the McIntosh (1993) article compares the privileges of being white with male privilege. These articles were selected because the topics are thought-provoking and we believed that the students could personally relate to the material. The students were not aware that the assignment was related in any way to the topic of gender and communication, which was scheduled for the second half of the semester.

The exercise began by breaking up the class into gender-balanced groups (4-6 students per group). A twenty-minute block of time was scheduled for each group at the college Media Center so that the group's discussion of the reserve readings could be videotaped. While at the Media Center, students were instructed to sit anywhere they would like (within a prearranged semi-circle of chairs) and begin talking.

Once all of the groups completed the first portion of the assignment, the "true" purpose of the project was shared with them in class. The students were to conduct a gender analysis of the patterns of communication that were present in their videotaped discussions. We provided the students with two readings that helped to aquaint them with the research on gender and communication (Matlin, 1993 & Tannen, 1991). These readings review the research on gender differences and similarities that exist in verbal and nonverbal communication patterns. Each group was to assess whether the conversational gender patterns described in the literature (Matlin, 1993 & Tannen, 1991) applied to the patterns of communication in the group's videotape. Analyzing communication patterns is very straight-forward because the patterns can be easily observed and measured; for example, the number of conversational fillers could be counted for each gender. Each group analyzed its tape differently; for instance, in some groups the members analyzed themselves individually with respect to all of the variables, while in other groups each member of the

group analyzed everyone in the tape on one or two particular variables.

Once the videotape analysis was completed, each group presented to the class: 1) an edited version of its videotape (2-5 minutes), 2) an oral presentation of its findings, and 3) a one page summary of its findings and reactions to this assignment. The edited tape contained segments of the original tape, that demonstrated examples that matched those findings documented in the literature (Matlin, 1993 and Tannen, 1990). Students were also encouraged to discuss and present any instances in which their communication patterns did not match those described in the literature.

Overall, the communication patterns displayed by the members of the class closely matched that of the gender-typical communication patterns described in the literature. More specifically, the male students tended to take control of the conversation in several ways: they initiated the conversation, and they talked for long periods of time. The male students also used more verbal pauses and hand motions and they positioned themselves in what they perceived to be the "lead" chair. The males did not llok at the females when the females spoke. The females on the other hand tended to smile more, they sat perfectly still, took up very little space (sat compactly), and they almost always looked at the speaker.

Most of the research on gender and communication has been conducted with male and female subjects who are unacquainted. Our

students knew each other very well, because in Moravian College's Core curriculum the students take a series of courses together (the Gender Issues Core seminar is the last of the seven course). Because our students know each other so well, we did not expect our students to exhibit as many of the gender-related patterns as they did. Our findings suggest that subject familiarity does not alter the observed gender differences in communication patterns.

This exercise allowed our students to focus their attention on the details within a conversation that would normally go unnoticed or if noticed may not have been associated with gender. The exercise provided the students with a new awareness of themselves and their classmates. The students were able to observe how often their behavior is consistent with gender stereotypes. For the most part our students were not very happy with what they witnessed on the video-tapes. The males found themselves to be highly invasive and controlling (this was due in large part to the amount of physical space they took up and the frequency of their interruptions). The females, on the other hand, remarked that they found themselves to be much more passive then they would have predicted.

In general, our students really enjoyed this project because it was very practical. The students were glad to have the opportunity to examine their own behavior in this unique way. Many of the students remarked through the semester that they were continuously watching people interact and communicate with one another. More importantly, they would be analyzing the interactions as they relate

to gender stereotypes and the gender-related findings in the literature.

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